

War Poetry: The New Sensibilities

‘It’s getting dark but not dark enough to see

An exit wound as an exit strategy’

— Paul Muldoon

In 2014 the world observed the centenary of the dirtiest event in the history of mankind, the First World War. Many wars had been fought by man before this gruesome global bloodbath; some like the Hundred Years War between England and France had lasted much longer. But it was literally unprecedented in terms of the degree of violence, the span of involvement and the magnitude of human toll it claimed. True, the Second World War surpassed the first in every respect, but the enormity of devastation in the latter was due to improvement of military technology introduced for the first time during WW1. British poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen vehemently protested against this wanton waste of innocent lives, thus giving birth to a new poetic genre popularly known as war poetry. It is not that any poem dealing with war may be described as a war poem. To be a war poem a poem must not only be inspired by war, it must express a particular attitude to war. It must neither justify war as an event for the show of manliness as happens in many primary epics, nor must it uphold fighting as inevitable for the vindication of what is right when it is in conflict with what is wrong. Bertrand Russell has significantly remarked, ‘war does not determine who is right—but who is left’, that is who survives the catastrophe. Contrarily, a war poem worth its name unambiguously condemns fighting, the application of force to resolve a conflict. Stephen Spender has ironically described force as *ultima ratio regum*, ‘the final argument of the kings’ (Williams 302). Any well-written poem on war is pacifist in intent, admonitory in purpose, and realistic, as distinct from romantic, in treatment¹. The staple of a war poem is firsthand experience,

and it is written less to entertain but more to sensitize man to the brutalities of the battlefield as well as the terrible suffering of man not due to some natural calamity before which man is helpless but due to the application of preventable force. Owen, who holds a legendary status among British war poets, in a letter to his mother dated May 1917, describes himself as a ‘conscientious objector with a very seared conscience’. He wrote from firsthand experience and used his pen not to glorify heroism or honour but to express ‘the pity of war’ (Hewett 154), that is, to expose the tragedy that any battle, however small, entails. As war poetry has a professed aim of building public opinion in favour of peace, it often is indistinguishable from propaganda. But this has not diminished the literary flavour of war poems, for the articulation is poetic. What Robert Graves has said about Owen’s poetry in a letter to Siegfried Sassoon is worth quoting in this context since it is true of all war poems: poetry ‘is not of course in the propaganda but in spite of the propaganda’ (O’ Prey 171).

It is not that the tradition of war poetry disappeared after the First World War. It could not because the armistice of 1918 has been repeatedly shaken by gory events of international and internecine confrontation—the Second World War (1939-1945), Korean War (1950-53), Vietnam War (1962-75), Sino-Indian War (1962), Falklands War (1982), Gulf War (1990-91), Yugoslav Wars including Kosovo Conflict (1992-2001), Kargil War (1999), Afghanistan War (2001-14), Iraq War (2003-2010), Gaza War (2008-2009), Russo-Georgian War (2008), and Israel-Palestine conflict continuing since 1947 with sporadic phases of outburst. Hundreds of civil wars across the globe (say, in Spain, Bosnia and Somalia) and, terrorist activities like the demolition of the twin towers of World Trade Centre on 9/11 as well as combat operations against terrorist insurgency in India against the Maoists, in Srilanka against the LTTE bear testimony to the conclusion that the human

civilization has failed to settle disputes through dialogues. War is, as Russell thinks, the failure of human reason because what one fails to convince through argument one tries to enforce by overpowering resistance. Indeed, the phase of Cold War followed by repeated outbreak of armed conflicts warrants the conclusion that the world is yet too hot to celebrate the flying of the white dove.

No wonder that war poetry continues to be written although one may find certain strikingly new features in war poems written since the WW II. The question of firsthand experience is no longer valid in our times of electronic media when one may form a realistic opinion of what actually happens from a distance of thousands of miles. Secondly, the sophistication of military technology has immensely increased the power of devastation, and as this can be done by flinging a missile with the press of a button, the word 'confrontation' has become dated in the martial lexicon. Thirdly, with the growth of consciousness, the tone has switched from condemnation to accusation. While the poetry of the WW I condemns the act of organized butchery, contemporary war poetry accuses the perpetrators without mincing words. Statesmen are not shown as protectors of the nation but heartless brutes ruining the nation to satisfy their greed for power. Fourthly, as Weapons of Mass Destruction including chemical weapons and nuclear bombs are used without any scruple to extirpate the opponents, civilian-toll is one of the major themes of contemporary war poetry. Fifthly, prolonged exposure to violence in a situation of uncertainty of existence often makes the participants of war incurable psychopaths, thanks to the monstrosity of violence to which the modern army men are destined to be witnesses. Sixthly, using the near-relation point of view for intensifying the 'pity of war', probing how women and children are differently impacted in the anarchy of war, blaming the politicians by name, foregrounding the ecological hazard consequent upon military

operation, using the form of parody for driving home the truth of war—all these prove that post-WW I war poetry is also a precious mine of cultural output, and its social significance lies in its unambiguous pacifist stand—in its determination to warn man against having recourse to violence irrespective of the bone of contention.

We would be mistaken if we think that it is the English War Poets like Wilfred Owen who first stripped war of all its hoary romanticism and pseudo-idealism. Contemporary war poets on the continent also composed verse in the same realistic vein. For example, Emmanuel Saul, a German-Jewish war poet (1876-1915), unmasked the politico-economic design often camouflaged under a noble mission of ensuring justice. He maintains that soldiers do not fight for any noble idealism like medieval knights. Victims of ‘bold lies and the basest treachery’, they fight ‘to enrich’ the merchants ‘[a]nd thieves hungry for gold to make more rich (‘To My Children’ 66). Incidentally, Saul has problematized the idea of nationalism for the sake of which violence is legitimized by politicians. At a time when mounting anti-Semitism made the Germans sceptical about the patriotism of the Jews of Germany, persons like him had to join the war to prove that they did not have Judas’s blood running through their veins²: fighting for Germany was:

To gain for ourselves—even if fate wills
That we pay with our blood—our Fatherland.
For Jewish kin have sadly called the land
In which we live Stepfatherland. (‘To My Children’ 105-108)

Whatever be the motivation, modern war poets consider it stupid that something can be *won* through application of force and causing destruction. Their unambiguous stand is that a victory that is achieved through destruction is a victory manqué. The concluding lines of Simon Icke’s verse ‘War Has No Winners’ are worth quoting here:

We live the lie of "war and glory".

War has no winners, is the truthful story. (7-8)

Small wonder that poets like Martin Harris have attacked the duality of the principle that on the one hand considers murder as a heinous crime but legitimizes it at war: 'Why at war it's right to take a life but in peace time, it's our worst crime' ('Marching Men' 12). Tom Walker, who participated in the Second World War as a naval officer, pricks this absolute absence of principle that is at the root of war. He maintains that when 'greed sups with the devil', when 'power is corrupted', and 'reason is a prisoner', '[t]he bell tolls for the dead' ('Bloody War—The Cause' 8). At the time of the First World War martial-technology was in its infancy. Tanks, submarines and bombing planes were introduced but these had not yet been sophisticated into weapons of mass destruction. The Second World War onwards, machines have prevailed over muscles in war which is why the fatality has become almost incalculable³. Whereas the number of casualty in WW I is about 170,000, WW II took a toll of 20 millions of lives in USSR alone. No wonder that mined road, chemical weapon, gas chamber, ambush and holocaust, blitzkrieg and dropping incendiary like napalm bombs, and, the most monstrous of all, the explosion of atom bombs, figure persistently in contemporary war poems.

Soldiers are human beings, neither killing machines nor unfeeling robots. Whereas the First World War poets exploded the myth that soldiers are indifferent to bodily pain, post-World War I poets have exploded the myth that they have no scruple in injuring their opponents. True, in Owen's 'Strange Meeting' the adversary is greeted as 'my friend'; but this happens in a *post-mortem* fantasy. In contemporary War Poems the humanness of the soldiers is often revealed by placing them in contexts that call for human response. Nigel Bruen's 'Casualties' inspired by the casualties on 8th June 1982 during Falklands war

illustrates the point. Without romanticizing sacrifice, the poem reveals the humanity of a wounded soldier in times of existential crisis:

The stretchered sailor, by his friend
Whose hand he clasped and willed his pain to mend,
In whispers to a medic, raised
Imploring eyes whose sparkle, morphine-glazed,
Said, "Help my oppo, please, not me;
He's hurting bad, and worse—he cannot see." (Casualties 1-6)

While Rupert Brooke glorified the death of soldiers as martyrdom⁴, Sassoon attacked not only sham patriotism but the misconception that 'chivalry redeems the war's disgrace' ('Glory of Women' 4). Modern War Poets are more interested in exposing the game plan of the war mongers. They are uninhibited in targeting diplomatic conspiracy for making a holocaust of innocent human lives. That is why the tone of contemporary war poetry is sharply political. It not only describes the woes of warriors fighting in the fronts, but names the countries or leaders responsible for the carnage. Consider, for example the poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy's poem on the torture of Guantanamo Bay. Written in memory of Adrian Mitchell and using the form of cross-examination it juxtaposes official reports and subversive understatements:

Were 1200 targets marked on a chart?
Nothing was circled in black.
On what was the prisoner stripped and stretched?
Nothing resembling a rack.
Guantanamo Bay—how many detained?
How many grains in a sack? ('Big Ask' 10-15)

The poem proceeds to indict America for compounding Iraq on false charge of possessing WMD:

Where was Saddam when they found him at last?

Maybe holed under a shack.

What happened to him once they'd kicked his ass?

Maybe he swung from the neck.

The WMD . . . you found the stash?

Well, maybe not in Iraq. ('Big Ask' 29-34)

In 'Descent', Alan Jenkins attacks Winston Churchill for underestimating the damage of military offensive. He draws a nauseating picture of soldiers swamped in 'lake of blood/ And plasma and the seepings of old sores/ And indistinct stuff, rotted flesh and mud/ And floatings of chemical froth' (1-4). Nearly choked by muck that filled their mouth, and forced to swallow the threads of mucous that dripped from this wet filth, they curse Churchill for having no foresight, for wrongly thinking that 'war will be some kind of fucking-picnic'. The poem incriminates the world leaders for the miserable plight of the men in the army: 'But no lie they repeat will justify/Their crimes, or earn forgiveness from the dead' ('Descent' 34-35).

Poets of the First World War expressed the pity of war mostly by dwelling on the suffering of the fighters. One may recall here Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' where a gas-victim writhes in agony with hanging face, 'at every jolt, the blood/ Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, / Bitter as the cud/ Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues' (Hewett 156). Often this is done by urging upon us to think of the wanton waste of precious life as in Owen: 'Was it for this the clay grew tall?/ O what made the fatuous sunbeam toil/ To break earth's sleep at all?' ('Futility' 12-14). Modern war poets have adopted a number of strategies to evoke pity. First, they terrify us with pictures of fragility of everything in a war-ridden existence. Consider, for example, the following lines of Michael Brett:

What haunts you after an explosion
Is the eggshell nature of things

.....

The houses sliced like cake; . . .
For—in truth—bombs show us everything we need to know
That everything is just a house of cards ('Boston Bombing' 1-30)

Secondly, the combatant-perception of life is zoomed in with a view to ensuring non-conventional response to any incident of martial violence. Paul R. Allen, a maimed combat veteran of America, in 'The Warrior's Code of Honor' shares with his readers this alternative perspective—when a soldier feels alive, when sad, when alone, what surprises him or what makes him triumphant. Allen describes a soldier's duty as a 'suicidal waltz': 'You never feel so alive as when being shot at without result. . . . The biggest sadness of your life is to see friends falling. The biggest surprise of your life is to survive the war. . . . The more combat, the more fear you must "not feel." . . . You become an emotionally dead man walking, feeling virtually nothing for nobody. . . . Although you may be an emotionally dead man walking thru life mostly alone, you are not lonely. You have a constant companion from combat—Death. It stands close behind, a little to the left' ('The Warrior's Code of Honor' *passim*). Thirdly, in many war poems focal angles are dexterously manipulated to jerk the reader's consciousness. Thus, John C. Bird contrasts several dinings—of mice in Trench Café, of commanders in headquarters, of politicians in banquet halls, and of hapless soldiers in trenches. The rats daily have 'meat on the menu'—they feed upon 'a limbo, a torso, a tasty entail' of the dead, and for wine they have 'vintage red' lifeblood of the newly dead; the top brass in their secure headquarters posts raise their glasses 'for toasts/ to battles they have boldly fought'; the politicians 'fortified with scotch' talk 'of a war to end all wars'. These dinings are then juxtaposed

with the dining of the troops who are 'served the same cocktail/ of bullets, privations and mud' (27-28).

If the poetry of the First World War is principally preoccupied with the nightmarish experience of the soldiers, war poems today also attempt to explore the impact of this backward 'march of the retreating world' on the life of the bereaved. Of this the most heart-rending is the misgivings and the agony of the mother of the victim. In the poems of W. Gabriel Dinkha, an Assyrian female living in Australia, the mother's point of view has been captured with meticulous care. The mother, having carried the life of her son for ten months in her womb and having brought him up with all her affection, is unwilling to let him join the army. Failing to stop the conscription and anxious about the inevitability of death, she desperately advises her son: "If heaven decides to call your name/Pretend you never heard" ('Victims of War' 43-44). Finally when she gets the news of his death, she breaks down making a Delphic utterance that wars will never end till the world leaders personally suffer the agony of bereavement: 'THEN MAYBE WHEN YOU LOSE A CHILD/YOU'LL GIVE US ALL RELIEF!!' ('Victims of War' 71-72). One more important point to be noted in this regard is that contemporary war poems are to some extent gendered, for they project women as most vulnerable in any dissension involving quarrelling nations/ ethnic groups. This is because in addition to all common motivations for assault, there is the patriarchal thought that a woman is a sex-object and every woman of the target country/ group is the 'mother of tomorrow's enemy'. Anne Baring has realistically captured this gendered facet of war-time atrocity:

They took the young girls away out of the cars, out of the trailers.
Everyone knew what would happen. Girls too young to imagine
the coming thrusts tearing their soft skin,

the rank smell of masked men crazed with blood lust,
and hatred for the innocent girl, mother of tomorrow's enemy.
Some they shot, some returned to the convoy
Hours or days after the rape. ('Kosovo Easter 1999' 46-52)

War is a violence unleashed by man not only against fellow human beings but against all life and nature. One important aspect of post-WWII war poems is its environment consciousness. Earlier poets were concerned with the human toll and human suffering, ignoring the question of how nature gets ravaged in the crossfire. Not that there is no mention of the battering of nature in the First World War poetry. In Owen, for instance, we come across such lines as:

And instantly the whole sky burned
With fury against them; earth set sudden cups
In thousands for their blood; and the green slope
Chasmed and steepened sheer to infinite space. ('Spring Offensive' 29-32)

The feeling that nature has been so awfully brutalized is sincere, but devoid of any concern regarding hazard to environment caused by the fusillade. War poems today do not let us forget that when explosives burst the environment is wrecked more horribly than the enemy who are the real targets. This will be clear if we contrast Owen's lines with the lurid picture of a burning oilfield in a recent poem written by an ex-soldier and based on firsthand experiences of the Gulf War. As the 'oil well burns on', the sky 'sheds black tears and dust', the earth 'bleeds flames and smoke', the sun 'cannot get through' the pitchy curtain of smoke, the human skin is coated in 'oily blackness' and all 'food and water taste of oil':

Desert sand turns black under the remorseless blaze,
As the oil continues to rain down.
This is war against the earth,
They poison the sky,
.....
Of hell made real by man. ('Midday Darkness' 17-27)

In the poem 'The Dancing Deer' (2006), Marianne Griffin has exhibited another facet of this civilized consciousness—the insecurity of other creatures who are robbed of their right to existence in times of war with which they are not connected at all. No less important in contemporary war poetry is the note of protest against how war undermines the pillars of human civilization and values. During the Iraq war the national museum of Iraq was looted and ransacked by the USA troops. Amanda Dalton sharply lashes at Donald Rumsfeld, the American secretary of defence, when instead of condemning this vandalism, he tried to cover it up by using the euphemism, 'untidiness':

missing maybe 3 or 11,000
(depending what you read), missing
the Hatra Heads, the Nimrud Lioness,
and doubting they'll ever get them back,
those bits of the world,
bits of the civilised world, scattered. ('Untidiness' 13-18)

Another related issue in contemporary war poetry is the violation of human rights that often manifests in the form of prisoner abuse. 'Abu Ghraib' written by Curtis D. Bennett, a Vietnam veteran from US, has boldly captured the inhuman persecution of the detainees in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The poet shames us with several details of torture of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers collected from snapshots circulating the world over: naked

men in hood clustered on the floor, with an American girl pointing at their genitalia ‘as if she found it somewhat lacking’ (13); one showing a screaming man with electrodes attached to his fingers; another shows a handcuffed soldier ‘Cringing against the wall’ with tiger like dogs about to pounce on him; the ‘most disturbing’ of all is the picture of an American soldier holding the leash tied to the neck of a prisoner:

She stood there stoically watching
Her captured prize of Iraqi manhood
Cowering on the cold cement.
.....
Totally submissive and subservient
Totally at the mercy of the war. (‘Abu Ghraib’ 33-40)

While the issue of civilian-casualty is peripheral in the poetry of the First World War, it has come to the centre-stage since the World War II, thanks to the indiscriminate use of warheads to overpower one’s opponents. May Hill in one of her much read poems, poignantly depicts a barbarous blitzkrieg leading to enormous civilian toll which the warmongers unabashedly justify as ‘collateral damage’. While innocent children are at play in a school, the air-raid starts without a ‘warning wail’, mowing them down with a storm of thunder and lightning, pouring ‘murderous steel for hail’:

And thunder-bolts crashed and crushed,
Bruising, and killing, and maiming,
Wherever the storm-clouds brushed.

(‘Bombing at Noon of School at Lewisham’ 10-12)

Some contemporary war poets have probed deeper into the issue of civilian toll. They have interrogated the basic premise of civilian toll which counts only the number of direct victims of a military offensive from among non-army men, excluding the multitudes of

people who are indirect victims of any political dissension reaching a point of no return. In her poem 'An Open Letter to John Ashcroft, Attorney General of the United States', Claire Braz-Valentine casts sarcastic dig at the propriety of Ashcroft's idea to cover the exposed breast of the Spirit of Justice⁶. Assuming that nudity even in art form is in bad taste, is it not nastier to spend money to drape the breast of an aluminum statue while thousands of babies perish in Afghanistan because the mammary glands of their mothers are dry due to long starvation? In the opinion of the poet, ordering 'the biggest bra in the world' is nothing better than seeing the aluminium-breasts in the light of Ashcroft's 'own inhibited sexuality' when multitudes of women in Afghanistan are

. . . baptized into death as collateral damage
and the hollow eyed Afghani mother's milk has dried
up underneath her burka
in famine, in shame,
and her children are dead at her breast.
('An Open Letter to John Ashcroft, Attorney General of the United States' 58-62)

The poet faults the Attorney General's priorities and rightly concludes that he has sent the wrong message to the world by executing his plan to turn the naked 'boob' into a 'bodacious bosom':

It's not the money it cost.
It's the message you send. (69-70)

Whereas the poetry of the First World War deals primarily with the suffering of soldiers due to physical injury, contemporary war poetry concentrates on the bruised psyche of the survivors. Owen in 'Mental Cases' has no doubt touched upon this aspect of war and portrays survivors as 'purgatorial shadows' whose 'minds the Dead have

ravished'. True, in Wilfred Wilson Gibson's poem a soldier, haunted by the spectre of wrongs he perpetrated as a combatant, desperately tries to distance himself from his own killer self. The compulsion to act against the approval of his conscience makes him a split personality. He cannot face the reality when he is asked to narrate what he did in the battlefield:

. . . it wasn't I,
But someone just like me,
Who went across the sea
And with my head and hands
Killed men in foreign lands . . .
Though I must bear the blame,
Because he bore my name. ('Back' 1-10)

This is suggestive enough, but the scars of the injured mind are still beyond the perception of the reader. It is here that post-war war poetry is different. How war shatters the mind of soldiers, causing traumatic disorders of various designations, has over the years emerged as a major motif in war poetry. Modern war poetry presents with clinical accuracy the survivors' agony, their failure to adjust with the world around. Whole or hurt, soldiers returning from the front at the end of war after years of exposure to violence and sternness, face difficulty in regaining normalcy or adjusting to civil life. In John Agard's poem 'In Times of Peace' a soldier, back from the front, fears that 'without the adrenalin of a bullet's blood-rush' his war-worn heart might grow sluggish. He wonders how his fingers, used to 'trigger's warmth', 'deal with skin/ that threatens only to embrace?' ('In Times of Peace' 3-4). His feet used to treading over dead bodies will be ill at ease if they are to cope with the foam of a bubble bath; his ears 'tuned to sirens' will be terrified by the closing of wings of birds; his eyes adjusted to visual devastation will be terrified in

peacetime by ‘bootless invasion’ of a dancing butterfly. James Love in *PTSD* articulates the agony of ex-soldiers who suffer from Post-traumatic stress disorder because of nerve-ragging tension and prolonged exposure to violence. Recurring flashbacks of a violent past that cannot be wiped out from the memory torment them. In Cesca M. Croft’s poem ‘They Say Time is a Healer’ a soldier is cursed with an indelible memory. He re-lives after 20 years the moment when due to the imminence of death he was collapsing with fear, his ‘nerves in shreds, mouth deadly dry’. Even the sound of a cracker appalls him now and, he discovers to his horror that the nightmare

. . . won’t go away.
It is still here, 20 years on,
and every firework
that you casually let off
proves that time
is not a healer. (‘They Say Time is a Healer’ 34-39)

This psychopathic alienation⁷ induced by the ‘playback of combat’, to borrow Nicholas Lutwiche’s phrase, is characteristic of contemporary war poetry.

The texture of war has undergone sea change since the First World War. In Owen one comes across such expressions as ‘the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle’ or ‘the shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells’ (‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ 3, 7); ‘Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles’ (‘Mental Cases’ 16). This is indeed spine-chilling. But it appears quite innocent when compared to the destructive fury of chemical weapons used in modern warfare. War today is no fencing game between two skilled swordsmen, but, as Anne Baring has revealed, a showdown of incalculable casualties:

. . . Missiles
tipped with depleted uranium,

radioactive ceramic designed to bring slow death years later;
Missiles targeting oil refineries, bridges, communications.
(‘Kosovo Easter 1999’ 157-60)

Small wonder that poets today are keen to dwell both on the monstrosity of instant massacre and on long-term effects of chemical or biological weapons that cripple many generations. If Anne Baring describes the missile as ‘a lion leaping upon you/ No time to prepare for extinction’ (164), Hubert Wilson in ‘Rainbow Death’ laments the ‘Execrable effects of agent orange spray’⁸ which resulted in the death of thousands during Vietnam War.

In ‘Dreams of War: Reportage in verse’ Adrian Mitchell, the ‘shadow poet laureate’, ‘the British Mayakovsky’, prudently notes: ‘One way to fight the masters of war is with explosive jokes.’ It is joke frequently indistinguishable from sarcasm that is the staple of *Between Bush & Blair: A Post-War Sewer of English Verse*, an excellent collection of metrical parodies on Iraq war by Nigel Stuart. In the Foreword to his famous anthology Nigel Stuart frankly admits that the ‘anthology was inspired by the smashing of international law’⁹ by George Bush and Tony Blair with the ‘illegal invasion of Iraq’. The purpose of the book is, as explained in the Foreword is to bring to book the war criminals, the perpetrators of war and their ‘corporate masters’. Stuart reconstructs the well-known lines of Robert Herrick to expose the economic calculation behind human sacrifice:

Gather ye oil-fields while ye may,
Your ‘term’ is still a-flying:
And these same troops that smile to-day,
Tomorrow will be dying . (‘Counsel of Whores 1-4)

His ‘To His Coy Masters’, a parody of Marvell’s metaphysical lyric is a powerful tirade upon the war-mongers who try to camouflage their colonial motive under a noble mission.

Addressed to Hans Blix who headed the commission that searched Iraq in 2002 for WMD, the poem mimics Marvell's lines and says that empirical expansion could continue for thousand years. But the President is impatient because: "But at my back I always hear /Second term's chariot hurrying near." So ignoring all values and principles he decides to go to war on the flimsiest pretext ground of ensuring peace of the world:

Now therefore, while the victor's hue.
Sits on my brow, like success due,
While voters' willing hearts transpire.
At every poll with foolish fire,
.....
Let's roll our corp'rate strength an' all.
Its sweet'ners up into one ball,
And contracts plunder from this strife—
Before men count the costs in life.
Thus, though we'll not free Iraq's sun,
We still will grab our loot and run. ('To His Coy Masters' 33-46)

In 'A River of Fire' he remakes Blake to appall us with a picture of the effects of carpet bombing:

Tigris, Tigris burning bright
In the flames that came each night
What crazed mortal's hand or eye
Could use thee for a cemetery? ('A River of Fire' 1-4)

'Thanks a Bunch', ironically dedicated to Rt. Hon. Geoffrey Hoon, who questioned in the House of Commons about British responsibility for the deaths of Iraqi children killed by cluster bombs, is modelled on Wordsworth's 'The Daffodils': 'I gazed—and gazed—stunned by the thought/ What miseries these clusters brought' ('Thanks a Bunch' 17-18).

In his poem ‘Irresponsible—an Ode’, Nigel Stuart draws upon Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’. The title is reminiscent of the words of Tony Blair who described Clare Short’s divulgence of British spying over UN Secretary General Kofi Annan as ‘irresponsible’. The entire poem is a classic exposure of the hypocrisy of the diplomats who kill without a scruple and call it justice. The following two lines echoing ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ sum up the moral of all war poems: “Liars make war, war liars”—that is all /I’ve known in power, and all you need to know” (‘Irresponsible—an Ode’ 49-50). Stuart uses the famous lines of Tennyson’s ‘Crossing the Bar’ to record his vision about the trial of diplomats after cease-fire and armistice:

Flashlights and evening news
And after that the night
And may I ‘scape the warrant that pursues
Me to indict. (‘Unwanted’ 9-12)

Terrorism has spread worldwide in the wake of recent wars. Hatred breeds hatred, violence triggers off counter-violence, but the result is the same: annihilation. Present generation of war poets has also responded to human carnage by terrorist strike, for it also uses force for destructive purposes. For example 9/11 incident, the destruction of the twin towers that took a toll of more than 5000 people and shook the world by the degree of human atrocity, has inspired a host of poems. Many of them are occasional and may not have any lasting value. But some have splendidly articulated the suffering and helplessness of man in presence of a catastrophe of superhuman magnitude. In ‘When the Skyline Crumbles’ Eliot Katz tellingly articulates the impact of the destruction of the twin tower in 9/11 attack on World Trade Centre. With ‘orange flames & monstrous dust rolls’ replacing the city’s ‘world renowned skyline’, the horror became ‘planetfelt’. But instead

of learning any lesson from this heinous attack on human civilization, the mainstream TV continued to 'lubricate America's war machine' and urged upon the politicians to jump into 'retaliation against Bin Laden', and military experts started 'advocating carpet bombs & napalm' without taking into account the truth that the space may vary but the result will be the same. The poet justly shows that while some 'meat-hungry' Americans did not hesitate 'to support Bush Jr's rush to war', others, the right-thinking pacifists waved placards imploring "Honor the Dead; Break the Cycle of Violence". The poem next condemns 'the one-eyed giant Terror' as a 'senseless random murderer' and ends with an appeal to humanity to 'reject Terror in all its disguises' (76). The never ending flow of war poetry proves that even today the world is not sane enough to rank good sense above expediency and bid farewell to arms.

Notes

1. Two sentences from Owen's letters are worth quoting in this context:

'One poor devil had his shin bone crushed by a gun-carriage wheel, and the doctor had to twist it about and push it like a piston to get out the pus' (Letter to Harold, 1914).

'My feet ached until they could ache no more, and so they temporarily died. I was kept warm by the ardour of Life within me. I forgot hunger in the hunger for life' (Letter to Susan Owen, February 1917).

2. In '1947 Lottery of Birth' Cesca M. Croft recalls an incident associated with her birth which proves that racial profiling and ethnic cleansing did not end with the pogrom of Auschwitz. Immediately after her birth, her state was critical and her life was at stake. 'English doctors will not help' a girl who bore a German surname. Doctor Josef, a Jewish lady doctor who escaped the Nazis, attended and saved her life. Her perplexing question 'Can hate do so much to people that they take it out on a new born baby with the wrong surname?' has not lost its relevance even today.

3. Samples from fatality statistics:

World War I (1914–1918)

17,000,000

Spanish Civil War (1936-39)

365000

World War II (1939–1945)

60,000,000–85,000,000

Vietnam War (1962-75)

Over 56,000

Afghanistan (2001–2009)

US soldiers killed – 935, Afghan civilians - 30,000 approximately

Iraq War (2003-2009)

US soldiers killed - 4,300, Iraqi civilians killed - 100,000 approximately

4. Romanticizing the issue he claims that dying makes soldiers 'rarer gifts than gold' ('The Dead' 3) and if a soldier dies in a foreign land, the place of his burial remains for ever a sacred colony of his country:

If I should die, think only this of me:

That there's some corner of a foreign field

That is for ever England.' ('The Soldier' 1-3).

5. In 'The Warrior's Code of Honor', Paul R. Allen observes: 'You never feel so alive as when being shot at without result. . . . The biggest sadness of your life is to see friends falling. The biggest surprise of your life is to survive the war. . . . You live a different world now. You always will. Your world is about waking up night after night screaming, back in battle. . . . Those who have seen combat do not talk about it. Those who talk about it, have not seen combat. . . . The only time you do not feel alone is when with another combat veteran. . . . The more combat, the more fear you must "not feel." You may get so numbed up/shut down inside that you cannot feel much of anything. You become an emotionally dead man walking, feeling virtually nothing for nobody. . . . Although you may be an emotionally dead man walking thru life mostly alone, you are not lonely. You have a constant companion from combat—Death. It stands close behind, a little to the left. Death whispers in your ear; "Nothing matters outside my touch, and I have not touched you. . . . *YET!*" ('The Warrior's Code of Honor')

6. The Spirit of Justice is an 18feet aluminum statue of a woman symbolizing Lady Justice. Commissioned in the 1930's it was installed in the Hall of Justice, the

Headquarters of the US Department of Justice. It became a topic of debate when in 2002 John Ashcroft, the then Attorney General, allegedly had taken steps to cover its bare breast.

7. 'Your world is about waking up night after night screaming, back in battle. Your world is about your best friend bleeding to death in your arms, howling in pain for you to kill him. Your world is about shooting so many enemies the gun turns red and jams, letting the enemy grab you. . . .You come home but a grim ghost of he who so lightheartedly went off to war. But home no longer exists. That world shattered like a mirror the first time you were shot at. . . . The distance between the two worlds is as far as Mars from Earth. This is why, when you come home, you feel like an outsider, a visitor from another planet'.

8. Agent Orange is the code name for a herbicide and defoliant—contaminated with TCDD—used in the Vietnam War. It was responsible for the death not only of the people of Vietnam but also the soldiers in the US army who sprayed it. According to Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, of the 4.8 million people exposed to Agent Orange, 400,000 died or developed disability, and about 500,000 children were born in the next few years with birth defects.

9. Compare the following important sentence from the Judgement of the Nuremberg International War Crimes Tribunal (1945): "To initiate a war of aggression is not only an international crime it is the supreme international crime."

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